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Predating the 'Glasgow Miracle': The 1990s Avant-Garde Art of Diane Torr at Franklin Furnace

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Diane Torr at Franklin Furnace: Queering the Archive

New York's Franklin Furnace is 'on a mission to make the world safe for avant-garde art'.¹ A worthy yet complex pursuit, Franklin Furnace Archive has approached this mission with an aim to champion, document and preserve the history of avant-garde art since its inception in 1976 as a physical, and later digital space. Avant-garde art is characterised by its innovative, experimental aesthetic and radically charged nature, often existing outside mainstream history and art institutions.² Today, Franklin Furnace continues to encourage and foster the connection, tangible and intangible, of the artworks, artists and ephemera which have resulted.³

In uncovering Scottish art histories in connection to North America, this preliminary research focuses upon the relationships, influences and symbiotic associations born from, and nurtured at, the Furnace. In relation to geographical links and histories, this article will focus upon the performance works of the Scottish artist Diane Torr (1948-2017). By examining several of Torr's works the performativity of Scottish identity will be uncovered, as seen in her drag persona Hamish McAllister, a raconteur and bantering Robert Burns aficionado with an Ayrshire accent and dry humour.⁴ Through these performances, Torr's achievement in queering normative concepts of cultural and gendered expression and identity will be discussed in relation to lasting impacts upon the archive and art history. Geographically, Torr creates an intricate web of international movements which can be traced from her place of birth in Peterborough, Canada; to her childhood in Aberdeenshire; career in New York City; and her final home in Glasgow, Scotland. She trained in Dance and Performance at Dartington College in the south of England before her career gained international reach, both as a performance artist and later a visiting lecturer at Glasgow School of Art. Such knowledge and lived experiences, which have placed her work in international archives and histories, are pertinent to her oeuvre, influence, and memory.

Based in New York for more than three decades, Torr had a long association with Franklin Furnace as an independent and collaborative artist. Torr's rich archival presence lies within the physical as well as the digital Franklin Furnace Archive, appearing in the online event archive and the online moving image collection. Although the online database offers access to the archival collection, in part this research would have been impossible without physically entering the archive. This paper will focus on two performances, which are exemplary of Torr's performative elements, *Drag King Workshop* and *Ready Aye Ready, a standing cock has nae conscience*.

Queering the Archive and the 'Glasgow Miracle'

Franklin Furnace has featured cutting-edge art and a network of international artists, affectionately referred to as 'FF Alum', including Laurie Anderson and Jenny Holzer. The archive, throughout its history, has been cared for by a staff who have acted as artists, producers, collaborators, audiences, historians, and archivists throughout its exciting and varied timeline. Partnerships and connections, such as the Artist Book Collection at New York's Museum of Modern Art and the Franklin Furnace Ephemera Collection at New York University's Fales Library and Special Collections, have furthered the reach of Franklin Furnace.

The actions of queering as performed by artists, archivists and curators play an integral role in protecting commonly excluded histories and marginalised cultures and practices, something Franklin Furnace has worked tirelessly to preserve and promote in its own dedication to the avant-garde. Included in these histories are those which occurred between 1979 and 2001 by four Scottish performance artists and 'FF Alums': Fiona Templeton (b. 1951), Jason E. Bowman, Alastair MacLennan (b. 1943) and Diane Torr. Several Scottish artists have been featured and received Scottish Arts Council Funding for works hosted, and at times, produced by Franklin Furnace, such as Jason E. Bowman's *Untitled (Performance for Cyber Broadcast)* 1998, which is accessible in the digital archive.⁵

The notable emergence of Scottish and Scotland-based artists into the contemporary art scene termed the 'Glasgow Miracle' by Hans-Ulrich Obrist in 1996 noted the influential and award-winning talent of Scottish avant-garde artists and histories. While it is expected that many of these now well-known artists are represented and present in galleries and museums internationally, there remain alternative, hidden and unrealised histories to be unearthed. Histories which remain only in the form of traces or relics, or merely concepts of imagined performances found in forgotten funding bids or performance notes which themselves have the potential to live again through actions or instructional scores.

It is through Torr's performance works that a new Scottish identity and cultural actions, representations and ties were produced; and through work by organisations such as Franklin Furnace, that such actions are both preserved and historicised. Diane Torr borrowed elements from Scottish culture and memory as an embodiment and participatory act in the queering of history. An increased scholarship, such as recent works by Alana Kumbier and Clare Hemmings, has recently arisen in relation to the act of queering, which occurs to document past, overlooked, or excluded histories. These documents, themselves representations of marginalised communities and actions, enter the archive shifting the generalised concepts and practice of historicisation. The memorialisation of queer space and moments, as demonstrated by local and global community projects such as *Queering the Map*, have worked to link and engage communities into the action of creating and uncovering their histories.⁶

Uncovering traces of Diane Torr (1948-2017)

Elements of Diane Torr's performances, namely Scottish culture and memory, embodiment, participation, and the queering of history, present a unique opportunity to link presence and history. Although the live performance works discussed in this article and their lasting documents occurred and physically remain in New York City, the influence of Torr's performed culture and gender feed into a legacy within Scottish art history. Traces of Torr's presence and influence can be found in both Scotland and America.

Torr's performances in drag personas laid the foundation for the Drag King Workshop, which occurred on 17 September 1994 hosted at and sponsored by Franklin Furnace.⁷ The digital presence of this performance found within the event archives on Franklin Furnace's website includes a descriptive element of the performance as well as images of performers (Fig.1) and advertisement for the workshop. This advertisement puts forth the concept of the performance to the public, targets an audience and contextualises the performance predating the live event (Fig.2). Much like Torr's performative drag personas, this advertisement speaks to the opportunity to explore the male guise, domain, identity, and importance via learned gesture and behaviour.

In reflecting on the terminology, Torr noted in a 2004 interview with Sonya Sobieski from The Brooklyn Rail and Rebecca Patterson from the Queen's Company, that, 'the phrase "drag king" has changed'. Torr states that:

When I first started, it did mean taking on the male role and becoming that man, but now the term has really been adopted predominantly by the lesbian community and a lot of the performances referring to drag kings are indeed that, performances.⁸

Alongside performance documentation and Torr's own reflection and instruction on her drag king workshops, this statement situates the artist's intent of her performances and the performativity of gender. While workshop participants came from all walks of life and communities' change to 'while workshop participants came from varied background, demographics and communities. In the context of this research, it was the expression of gender and cultural identities, sitting outside the norm, which work to queer concepts of identity.

Confirmed in the Drag King Workshop advertisement, such embodiment acts as a useful pretence for both career and social purposes, as seen in Torr's performance as Hamish McAllister. Their male gender allowed for the cultural reading of past text and celebration, the authority of the stage and audience. Torr seems acutely aware of performative gender and of performance's potential for participatory access, as put by Judith Butler noting Michel Foucault's argument, 'there is no "sex" in itself which is not produced by complex interactions of discourse and power'.⁹

Torr's Drag King workshops continued to take place internationally for decades, being lived and documented throughout cultures, societies, and eras.¹⁰ In her book, *Sex, Drag, and Male Roles: Investigating Gender as Performance*, co-authored by Stephen Bottoms, Torr's workshops take a further step towards accessibility in the final chapter, 'Man for a Day: A Do-It-Yourself Guide'.¹¹ Within this chapter, Torr provides a written summary of her observations, preparations and actions to achieve passing as a male in public. In the final lines of the book, Torr reflects on both intent and purpose:

*Remember: Gender is an act. [...] And even if you feel you don't pass, the fact that you've entered into this transgressive act and are performing as a male is significant in itself. Maybe when people realize that gender is a cultural construct, it could eventually lead to a world where gender norms are abandoned, or in which genders proliferate beyond the pair commonly recognized. Just think, you are contributing to a dynamic revolution in the way we see ourselves, and how we are seen. You are creating a change in perception.*¹²

The second performance of Torr's which will be discussed, *Ready Aye Ready, a standing cock has nae conscience*, was initially presented at La Mama, an experimental theatre club in New York's East Village, in February 1992. This piece, rooted in Torr's Scottish identity and in her annual alternative Burns Nights suppers saw her take on the role of Hamish McAllister (Fig.3). Through her research and performance as Hamish McAllister, Torr took on the male authority in revising what she felt was an inaccurate and antiquated representation of Burns. This male authority, afforded to Torr in the gesture, guise and voice of the Scottish drag persona provided a cultural ownership unavailable to women, even in the presence of her women-only Burns suppers.¹³

Ready Aye Ready featured Torr as McAllister alongside four male-to-female drag performers as the Highland Illusion, together they performed as Scots telling the history of Burns, reading his poems and performing traditional Scottish song and dance (Fig. 4). Throughout the performance McAllister banters and drinks with the audience as the Highland Illusion perform explicit 18th century Burns songs in Scots dialect. The performance was opened and closed by a racy contemporary hip-hop dance performed by three women dressed as 'homeboys' which drew parallels to the contemporary climate of art and music censorship in the United States in the 1990s. This is perhaps best contextualised by the works of several artists who saw their funding withdrawn on the basis of 'indecentcy' by the National Endowment for the Arts, and the emergence of 'Parental Advisory' censorship in the recording industry. In light of these contemporary 'indecentcies', Torr posed that 'similar things could be said of some of our most revered cultural icons.'¹⁴

Aye Ready Aye not only queers performance in its personas and gestures, it queers the archive by its own inclusion and it queers the authorised histories resulting. These acts providing those with Derrida's feverish desire to approach the archive, seeking the repressed and bridging the gaps to uncover and redefine histories, the material and the

means to further uncover and promote new tellings of past action.¹⁵ Here, queer is not limited to defining elements of sexuality, but rather a lens through which conventional and normative viewpoints are challenged. Within this research, the queering occurs within the dominant and privileged structures of archives, history, and gender. In the search for historical ties and representations of identity, this performance and its documentation create unconventional perspectives and original links. Hamish McAllister's premier in *Aye Ready Aye* constituted Torr's first full-length performance in drag.¹⁶

I came across this work in the shape of a single photographic slide, held up to the light in Franklin Furnace Archive. The performance was not hosted by nor associated with the Furnace, yet the slide resides within the archive collection of Diane Torr related materials, sat within a support folder alongside performance proposals. The slide label provided the name of the artist, performing persona (pictured), title, location, and date. As the performance proposal at Franklin Furnace, similar to that of other funding bodies and spaces, at times sought multiple proposed concepts and evidence of past performances, it is likely that the slide was an attachment to one of Torr's later proposals. Such processes demand further investigation into what wealth may be hidden in proposal submission which include documentary elements or perhaps unrealised performances, written into concepts and scores waiting within the archive. Although this work lies outwith association to Franklin Furnace, and the research conducted around it was a result of secondary reading from Torr and Bottom's *Sex, Drag, and Male Roles* text, online video documentation and contact with the photographer Dona Ann McAdams, there is an importance to this slide's archival residence.¹⁷ In unearthing the histories of performance, the archive provides recognition, relevance and historical significance.

Within the archive, drag is elevated to art. While Torr was based in New York when these performances occurred, likely a more receptive space for such actions, the performances are not isolated from Scottish history. This is especially true due to Torr's embodiment of Scottish revisionist identities, genders, and histories. Not only present in her aforementioned performances, but also in works such as *Pissing Contest #1* (Homage to Nam June Paik) performed at James Cohan Gallery, New York in 2007, and *Donald Does Dusty* performed internationally from 2005 onwards in which Torr performs Scottish personas and identities.¹⁸ For Torr these performances and drag king workshops, which she continued to tour throughout her life, went beyond performance as *Journal of the Scottish Society for Art History* an art and into the cultivation and dissemination of a new culture.¹⁹ Situated here is the call to follow in Torr's instruction and explore identity socially, culturally and beyond gender, in her words to observe, supply clothing and test a new identity.²⁰ Torr taught as a visiting lecturer at the Glasgow School of Art during the final decade of her life, a position of privilege which like the archive signals the recognition and status of an artist and artwork. Glasgow's progressive art scene was influenced by Torr and by extension her early works existing in archives internationally, not least Franklin Furnace. An investigation of this relationship

of influences is wanting and would be worthwhile, such networks of documentation and influence play a part in my own PhD research.

In examining these performances, uncovering these archives and materials, the ties between Scotland and North America become deeper. Further to this, discourse around documentation and archiving is contextualised and read through the lens of the performative. Franklin Furnace's digital and physical archives include varying inclusions of performances, documentation, and associated material. The inclusion of performance proposals, aspects of performance artists' biographies, oeuvres, supporting documents and correspondence are essential in creating a performance archive. Such an archive affords the opportunity for research across eras, social, cultural, and political contexts. Torr's performances make an important contribution to Scottish art history but also to the collective cultural and gendered identity. In queering and questioning reiterations and embodiments of history and gender, there occurs a renegotiation of our own believed identities, behaviours, roles and rights. For Torr, in the guise of Hamish McAllister, this renegotiation centred on her identity as a Scottish woman and was rooted in her role as master of ceremonies in the Burns Night Suppers, which mirroring her role as McAllister reading Burns, afforded her 'access to a certain gravitas with this material that simply wasn't available to me as a woman'.²¹

Torr's work and her presence within Franklin Furnace Archive, as well as countless artists within countless archives, provide opportunities for researchers to uncover these histories, create the links and unearth the influence present yet unexplored. In Torr's queering of the archive and her work with gesture, movements and identity, whether experienced live or in absentia, there exist histories which provide new insights and links, new art histories.²² Within the context of this research, Torr's work speaks to expressions and depths of identity, be it national or gendered, as well as performative aspects of lived experiences.

Fig. 1 Diane Torr, Drag King Workshop, performance image view of participants post-workshop and pre-performance, 1994, photograph. Courtesy Franklin Furnace Archive, New York.

Fig. 2 Diane Torr, Drag King Workshop, performance Hand-Out, 1994, photocopy on paper. Courtesy Franklin Furnace Archive, New York.

Fig. 3 Overleaf, left. Diane Torr as Hamish McAllister, 'Its Queer Up North Festival Collection' Manchester, 1996, postcard. Courtesy Manchester Libraries, Information and Archives.

Fig. 4 Overleaf, right. Cast of Ready Aye Ready (A Standing Cock has Nae Conscience) at the Burns Memorial, Central Park, 1992, photograph. Left to right: Tom Keith, Adolpho Pati, Paul Langland, Scott Heron, Irving Gregory, Robin Casey, and Diane Torr (as Hamish McAllister). Courtesy photographer Dona Ann McAdams.

1 <http://franklinfurnace.org/about>

2 <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/avant-garde>

- 3 Franklin Furnace's collection of ephemera, documentation and records is physically accessible in Brooklyn, New York, where the organisation is housed at the Pratt Institute.
- 4 D. Torr and S. Bottoms, *Sex, Drag, and Males Roles: Investigating Gender as Performance*, Ann Arbor 2010, p.113.
- 5 T. Sant, *Franklin Furnace and the Spirit of the Avant-Garde*, Bristol 2011, p.120.
- 6 <https://www.queeringthemap.com/>
- 7 http://franklinfurnace.org/online_event_archives/index.php
- 8 Further sources of drag king history can be found at <https://dragkinghistory.com/>
- 9 J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York 2000, p.123.
- 10 The film, *Man for a Day*, by Katarina Peters, premiered Friday, February 10, 2012.
- 11 Torr and Bottoms (n.4), pp.259-269.
- 12 Torr and Bottoms (n.4), p.269.
- 13 Torr and Bottoms (n.4), pp.113, 173-4.
- 14 Torr and Bottoms (n.4), pp.178-9.
- 15 C. Steedman, 'Something She Called a Fever: Michelet, Derrida, and Dust,' *The American Historical Review*, Vol.106, 4, 2001, pp.1159-180.
- 16 Torr and Bottoms (n.4), p.113.
- 17 A video of *Ready Aye Ready* can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DNOB7Tj87SI>
- 18 Torr and Bottoms (n.4), pp.xi-xii, 251-258.
- 19 Torr and Bottoms (n.4), p.114.
- 20 <http://dianetorr.com/workshops/man-for-a-day-workshop/>.
- 21 Torr and Bottoms (n.4), p.174.
- 22 A. Jones, "'Presence' in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation", *Art Journal*, Vol.56, 1997, pp.11-18.